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REINHARD H. FRIEDERICH

Kafka and Hamsun's *Mysteries*

KNUT HAMSUN'S later political attitudes have obscured much of his earlier literary reputation. Understandable as this is, unfortunately it has often reduced consideration of some highly significant modern novels and their influence to footnotes, more or less appreciative plot summaries, and general speculations on vagabond types. Hamsun's second novel in particular, *Mysteries* (*Mysterier*, 1892), is not merely in itself one of the most provocative works of late nineteenth-century fiction; there are sufficient structural and thematic indications to demonstrate that *Mysteries* influenced not only Franz Kafka's earliest complete narrative, "Beschreibung eines Kampfes," but also *Das Schloß*.[1]

It is not just a possible literary connection between Hamsun's and Kafka's fiction which deserves close study. Parallel readings especially of *Mysteries* and *Das Schloß*, and also of a central passage of "Beschreibung eines Kampfes," illuminate and reinterpret Kafka's protagonists in their subjective and objective relations to their surroundings. Profound tragicomedies develop as the basic needs of an organically closed community lead to elaborate deceptions of the intruder. At the same time the comparison with Kafka's fiction leads to a deeper understanding of a novel which, true to its title, will always remain elusive where

[1] Kafka's admiration for Hamsun's work is beyond any doubt. His references to Hamsun in the diaries and letters always imply a close literary familiarity of long standing. In early 1911, for instance, he criticizes authorial intrusions in some minor novel by comparing it to Hamsun's writings, where such devices are "so natürlich wie die Knoten im Holz"; during December 1919 Kafka read the recently translated *Growth of the Soil* and compared the failures of the first son Eleseus to the dominating roles of similar characters in Hamsun's early works. Furthermore, Max Brod, both in his notes to the diaries and letters and in his biography, mentions that Kafka especially admired Hamsun's early works.

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mystery is essential, but whose difficulties do not detract from its major standing though they have discouraged wide popularity.

The protagonist of *Mysteries*, Johan Nilsen Nagel, arrives mysteriously one summer in a small Norwegian coastal town. He arouses considerable interest and consternation not only through the very fact that he is a stranger with unusual social habits but also because of a number of probably false representations of his financial, artistic, and professional standing. Nagel is about thirty years old, below average height, and generally handsome. His fluctuating personal relationships in the town form the bulk of the novel. They concern, first, Dagny Kielland, the minister's attractive daughter and the most desirable young lady in town whose engagement to a navy lieutenant is announced the day Nagel arrives; second, Johannes Grøgaard, nicknamed Minutten (translated "Midget"), a crippled former sailor whom the town's leading male citizens in particular treat as a dimwitted butt of their practical jokes; and Martha Gude, a forty-year-old spinster who lives in poverty in a small house by the harbor. After scarcely five weeks in town his unsuccessful courtship first of Dagny and then of Martha drives Nagel to suicide. Nevertheless, there are no open hostilities, and specific reasons for his death are as elusive as the reasons for his arrival in the first place.[2]

Nagel's tense relations with Dagny Kielland reach their climax during a charity bazaar where Dagny performs in a tableau and which Nagel attends with Martha Gude as his guest. During Martha's absence (later that same night Nagel will propose to her) Dagny violently lashes out at him, probably jealous of Martha and at the same time angered and emotionally divided by Nagel's confessions of love to herself as an engaged woman as well as by his constant prevarications, subterfuges, and lies:

'But why are you persecuting me? I don't mean now—it was I who came to you—but why can't you leave me alone? You will probably interpret the fact that I've stopped to talk for a minute as a sign that I'm worried and concerned.'

'My dear Miss Kielland, I have no illusions.'[3]

'No? But I never have any way of knowing whether you're telling the truth. I have a deep distrust of you and I believe you capable of just about anything . . .

'As a matter of fact, there is hardly anything about you that I do believe,' she went on. 'I've even suspected your big, broad shoulders of being padded. A while

[2] All references are to the most recent translation by Gerry Bothmer, *Mysteries* (New York, 1971).

[3] In the German translation which was accessible to Kafka this particular sentence reads: "Liebes Fräulein, nein, ich bilde mir nichts ein," *Mysterien*, trans. M. von Borch (Köln and Paris, 1894), p. 358. In general the contemporary American translation maintains a colloquial tone compared to the older German translation, in which formal precision and even pedantry ambiguously merge with colloquial or emotional phrasing.

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ago, I confess, I went into the cloakroom to check the shoulders of your coat. But though I was wrong, I still doubt everything about you. I'm sure that you'd be capable of making yourself a few inches taller, for instance, since you could certainly use the additional height. Good God! Who could possibly believe you! Who are you, anyway, and why did you come here? You're even using a pseudonym . . .' She was too upset, too angry with him, and she was belittling him. That was what really hurt. How did he appear to her, in truth—perhaps as just a run-of-the-mill stranger in a small town, a man who attracted attention simply because he was a stranger and wore a yellow suit [pp. 240-41].

The argument ends when Dagny leaves furiously after Nagel has shifted in typical fashion from emotional defeat to a totally irrelevant comment about some woolen shirts. Near the end of the evening he delights everybody with a spontaneously fiery violin solo on a borrowed instrument. His performance is particularly surprising since on his arrival he had paraded a violin case which aroused the town's curious speculations only to ridicule them later by his confession that the case merely contained dirty laundry!

Franz Kafka's earliest tale, "Beschreibung eines Kampfes," is a Chinese-box arrangement of failing social interactions. Its third and central story is the "Geschichte des Beters," which in turn has two parts: in the first one the supplicant describes his attempts to be taken seriously during a social gathering only to be ejected with goodnatured brutality; in the second part he tries just as unsuccessfully to transform a tired drunk he has met on his way home into his fantasy image of happy Parisian living. The "Geschichte des Beters" ends inconclusively and negatively as the supplicant stubbornly persists in forcing his fiction on the drunk who only wants to sleep.

Within the total narrative arrangement the supplicant's story is one exemplum demonstrating the commonplace world's resistance to private impositions. This conflict is reflected not merely in the story's plot but also in the sceptical attitude of the listener (as part of the Chinese-box effect) and even of the narrator himself, who prefaces it by stating, "Und Geständnisse würden am klarsten wenn man sie widerriefe."[4] Such a confession by way of denial brings to mind Nagel's method of antithetical propulsion. After fabricating a story and directly afterward confessing the deceit in a conversation with Dagny, Nagel explains, possibly with new deviousness:

'Even if you believed what I just confessed to you, you would still be taken aback by my candor. You would say to yourself: "He deceived me, but he confessed afterwards, though there was no reason for him to do so. His audacity mystifies me; his self-abasement confounds me!" What it really amounts to is that I force you to notice me . . . ' [p. 107].

[4] Franz Kafka, *Die Erzählungen*, ed. Klaus Wagenbach (Frankfurt, 1961), p. 236. All references to "Beschreibung eines Kampfes" are to this edition. Wagenbach dates the story 1904-05.

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The energy required for such constant shifting is considerable, however, and the oddly abrupt beginning of the "Geschichte des Beters" seems to indicate a longing for secure rigidity as the supplicant tries to keep up his verbal arrangements ("da ich immer einen Überblick über meine Sätze zu bewahren suche"); at a party he praises the ease of winter to a young lady who evidently does not share his problems: ". . . der Winter ist viel müheloser; man kann sich leichter benehmen, man braucht sich mit seinen Worten nicht so anstrengen. Nicht wahr, liebes Fräulein?" (p. 237). The need for the automatic formalities of a nonalive and cold season is surrealistically dramatized when the supplicant's leg begins to dislocate and then to disintegrate just like his words and must be precariously balanced.

The most telling event, however, is the young lady's rejection:

> 'Sie imponieren mir gar nicht,' sagte sie, 'alles was Sie sagen ist langweilig und unverständlich, aber deshalb noch nicht wahr. Ich glaube nämlich, mein Herr—warum nennen Sie mich immer liebes Fräulein—, ich glaube, Sie geben sich nur deshalb nicht mit der Wahrheit ab, weil sie zu anstrengend ist.'
>
> Gott, da kam ich in gute Lust! 'Ja, Fräulein, Fräulein, so rief ich fast, wie recht haben Sie! Liebes Fräulein, verstehen Sie das, es ist eine aufgerissene Freude, wenn man so begriffen wird, ohne es darauf abgezielt zu haben.'
>
> 'Die Wahrheit ist nämlich für Sie zu anstrengend, mein Herr, denn wie sehen Sie doch aus! Sie sind Ihrer ganzen Länge nach aus Seidenpapier herausgeschnitten, aus gelbem Seidenpapier, so silhouettenartig, und wenn Sie gehen, so muß man Sie knittern hören. Daher ist es auch unrecht, sich über Ihre Haltung oder Meinung zu ereifern, denn Sie müssen sich nach dem Luftzug biegen, der gerade im Zimmer ist' [pp. 237-38].

The accusation of incomprehensibility and deception, of unwillingness to cope with the truth, is as central here as in Hamsun's novel; even details of setting and phrasing, such as the accentuation of a form of address which is both deferential and confidential, "liebes Fräulein," suggest a connection. In addition, the curious color detail in the young lady's sarcastic description, "Sie sind . . . aus Seidenpapier herausgeschnitten, aus gelbem Seidenpapier," may recall Nagel's most visible eccentricity, his constant wearing of yellow suits.

Finally, in both works the scene ends with out-of-place musical performances: Nagel startles the company with a spirited violin recital despite his previous avowal that he could not play, and afterward Dagny is active in an unsuccessful attempt to make him repeat his performance the following evening. In Kafka's tale the supplicant attempts to play the piano after the young lady has left him. Everybody is amused since his inability seems common knowledge; the young lady ironically intercedes for him, but when he sits down at the piano he and the bench are suddenly carried away by two men. The company pretends to have been charmed by his nonexistent performance, he is pampered and humored,

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but when he tries to return to the instrument the host has him thrown out.

The inability to establish a workable connection between word and signification, between action and response, becomes the central issue in *Mysteries* and in "Beschreibung eines Kampfes." Such a connection would mean above all normal, automatic living within already established patterns and having recourse to an unreflectively "filled" past. Nagel's idiosyncratic behavior is largely due to his lack of stock responses, and his paradoxical quest in the town is a consequent attempt to carve an organic base—consciously to build a subconscious layer of communal experiences and participations. Kafka's supplicant asks his interlocutor for help in bearing the immensity of commonplace living: "Und ich hoffe von Ihnen zu erfahren, wie es sich mit den Dingen eigentlich verhält, die um mich wie ein Schneefall versinken, während vor andern schon ein kleines Schnapsglas auf dem Tisch fest wie ein Denkmal steht" (p. 234).[5] The supplicant's most poignant example is a childhood event:

> 'Als ich, ein kleines Kind, nach einem kurzen, Mittagsschlaf die Augen öffnete, hörte ich, meines Lebens noch nicht ganz sicher, meine Mutter in natürlichem Ton vom Balkon hinunterfragen: "Was machen Sie meine Liebe? Ist das aber eine Hitze!" Eine Frau antwortete aus dem Garten: "Ich jause so im Grünen." Sie sagten es ohne Nachdenken und nicht besonders deutlich, als hätte jene Frau die Frage, meine Mutter die Antwort erwartet' [p. 234].[6]

The interlocutor's comment, "Ein so gewöhnlicher Vorfall!" (p. 236), is hardly a solace; the event's commonplace ease is just what makes it unbearable for one who feels the lack of a social substratum. Waking up into the normal world repeats the birth trauma with all its unprotected nakedness.

More important than the influence on "Beschreibung eines Kampfes," however, are the connections between *Mysteries* and *Das Schloß*. In his interpretation of structural patterns in Kafka's work Walter Sokel has discussed most convincingly the protagonist K. as a stranger trying to establish a foothold in an ambiguous community. Without denying the superior quest objects of the protagonists of Kafka's late fiction, Sokel cogently analyzes the mysterious outsider position of K. which alienates and differentiates him from the community. K. attempts to force society to recognize his purely subjective, unprovable, and incommunicable claims as social reality. In the course of this attempt the protagonist

[5] See also a number of the meditations in *Betrachtung*, such as "Der plötzliche Spaziergang," "Entschlüsse," "Der Fahrgast."

[6] Wagenbach notes that this passage appears nearly literally in an early letter to Max Brod in *Franz Kafka in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, (Hamburg, 1964), p. 41.

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must act as a deceiver since he literally has to create a past for himself out of present and future situations. He further resembles those psychotics who lack a personality core and a sense of continuity and whose persistent lying indicates how strategy takes the place of truth.[7]

K.'s character and his relation to the community strikingly parallel Johan Nilsen Nagel and his role in the town. Nagel's arrival itself is suggestively indirect. He hands part of his baggage down from the steamer, reserves a hotel room, and then forgets to get off the boat so that he must disembark farther up the fjord and does not arrive in town until the following day. After dinner that evening he leaves again, walks back to the town from which he has just come, and returns after midnight. He confesses to Dagny much later that he had gone to the neighboring town in order to send three cables to himself referring to large money and property transactions (p. 213). By deliberately leaving those cables on his desk for the maid to see he establishes himself as a man of wealth and property. (Of course there is no way of knowing that this confession to Dagny is true.) Nagel's ostentatiously displayed violin case satisfies the town's need to label him at least for the first few days; music and his unusual yellow suits and conversational mannerisms classify him as an eccentric artistic type. This estimate is tempered in turn by his assumed wealth and his profession which he diffidently lists as agronomist, striding the middle ground between the ways of a conservative farmer and a liberal and progressive man of science. Nevertheless his only professional demonstration consists of assisting the doctor's wife with her flower beds.

Nagel does not appear to follow a master plan. He haphazardly adds or discards details and proceeds in desultory fashion, often by telling what may be analogous stories. From the beginning his stay in town is characterized by frantic and sporadic movements, eager explorations of possible personal mysteries among the natives, and a voracious appetite for general facts about the town's life. In marked opposition the town itself is static and expresses a comfortable closeness. One of the novel's remarkable features is its description of a completely normal and average town, open, friendly, and curious toward acceptable visitors, and at the same time structured into close complicity. All major and minor events fill the communal warp whose tightly packed organic structure makes it impenetrable.[8] Neither *Mysteries* nor *Das Schloß* deals with social osmosis or growth. Instead both portray definite if unspecified

[7] Walter H. Sokel, *Franz Kafka—Tragik und Ironie. Zur Struktur seiner Kunst* (Munich and Vienna, 1964), pp. 391, 419-20.

[8] Ronald G. Popperwell argues in "Interrelatedness in Hamsun's *Mysterier*" *SS*, 38 (1966), 295, 298, that "society is presented almost as a biological organism, implicitly atavistic in character, and made up of interrelated and interdependent organisms . . . In its corporate aspect, Nagel on occasion experiences the little

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confrontations from the very beginning, and the protagonists' attempts to gain acceptance are sleights of hand to fool the opposition into relaxing its attention so that the trickster can slip in; they are not organic changes.[9]

Distinctions between the two novels in regard to such basic social confrontations are mutually illuminating. What one might finally call participating indifference in Hamsun's town compares to a neutral indifference in Kafka's village (at least on the surface), where final responsibility always rests within the castle.[10] Still in both novels it is surprising how much the heroes get away with: innkeepers are treated superciliously, leading citizens are snubbed or intruded upon while ostracized outsiders are openly patronized, and others are directly insulted. Nagel for instance grossly insults Deputy Reinert as he "rescues" Minutten only to continue badgering him in a subtler form; shortly afterward he writes obscene verses on a girl's tombstone during a funeral and shocks social gatherings with his talk. K. bullies the peasants, hits the ailing Gerstäcker with a snowball, and mistreats his assistants. But no matter how aggressively the intruders try to participate, there is no way for them to blend into the collective past out of which the community's life grows; that remains sealed to them. Nagel cannot find out the real circumstances surrounding the student Karlsen's death, one of the first events he hears about; he remains in the dark about the possible affair between Deputy Reinert and Dr. Stenersen's wife as well as the one between Martha and Minutten; Dagny remains a mystery in spite of his fierce efforts to learn about her. K.'s situation is clearly spelled out by the landlady: "Wohin Sie auch kommen, bleiben Sie sich dessen bewußt, daß Sie hier der Unwissendste sind . . ."[11] The practical demonstration follows in the next chapter when K. finds it legally and technically impossible to get to "his" file under the mouldering stacks of papers in cabinets, barns, and—still further distanced through the mayor's narration—among the crashing pillars of files in Sordini's castle office.

Nagel and K. react with bold ingenuity. Since they cannot blend into the community's life they in turn attempt to create and control new

town very much in terms of menace, as a creature capable of swallowing him whole."

[9] Even *Growth of the Soil* develops no social interaction; the farm stays distinct from the village, and the fates of the characters remain individual fates which meet in episodic encounters.

[10] Nagel does stir up much excitement during his stay; nevertheless, both the manner in which he slips into isolation, rain, and darkness toward the end and the final distancing conversation between Dagny and Martha justify such a formulation.

[11] Franz Kafka, *Das Schloß*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1946), p. 71. All references are to this edition.

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realities in order to render the old ones ineffectual. All too often Kafka criticism sees K. only as the victim, but one should consider whether this is not mainly due to automatic connections to *Der Prozeß* and the major novellas as well as to the customary notion that K. seems to end in defeat.[12] But to begin again with *Mysteries*. In his conversation with Minutten after he has rescued him from Deputy Reinert, Nagel attempts to establish rather precisely the limits to which he can dominate the cripple.[13] Gaining some forbidden information about the suicide Karlsen and Dagny gives him the inner strength to approach the young woman and to establish a conversational intimacy which both keep secret from society; it is part of Nagel's design to develop such private associations. In a more elaborate sequence the new coat which Deputy Reinert had promised Minutten before the altercation with Nagel is ordered by Nagel after he has once more insulted Reinert privately on this point. Possibly the prime motif is goodness of heart, but the most conspicuous thing about this gift is Nagel's manipulative secrecy. Minutten, who thinks the coat comes from Reinert, is forbidden to discuss the matter, so that everyone but Nagel remains ignorant of the truth. A similar situation obtains when Nagel relieves Martha Gude's poverty by posing an an antique collector and in a complicated victory over her embarrassed protests buys a worthless old chair for an exorbitant sum of money, again binding her to secrecy; he pushes this game even further by telling Minutten, whose interest in Martha he senses, that he has indeed tricked her out of a priceless antique. All along Nagel uses the minor details he picks up from his interlocutors as building blocks for more elaborate schemes, hence, his affairs achieve a certain resemblance to the hidden crosscurrents of the town.

The most complex and oblique impositions are consequences of Nagel's frequent storytelling: while the town relies on a social structure based on past events which remain closed to outsiders, Nagel intrigues with his substitute past, a large number of skillfully told stories whose ultimate truth always remains locked within the teller. Some of them are merely short anecdotes, others keep haunting their audiences like nightmares,[14] and still others—or in the end perhaps all of them to-

[12] Yet just in the end things are less decisive than ever unless the reader accepts Brod's version of a projected conclusion as the final word. In the last chapter both Pepi's reinterpretation of Frieda and the dreamy *Kleider-machen-Leute* charade with the landlady ("du bist entweder ein Narr oder ein Kind oder ein sehr böser, gefährlicher Mensch," p. 361) suggest much more flexible solutions. Instead of death one might rather think of a range of open endings as in Melville's *Confidence Man* or Fellini's film *8½*.

[13] See also Popperwell, p. 299.

[14] The dream about the persecuted madman (Minutten) struggling toward his tormentor to thank him for showing mercy (pp. 72-74) and the "fairy tale" about the madman and his blind daughter in the tower (pp. 109-17) are most memorable.

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gether—become exemplary guides for the direction reality takes. Shortly after relations to Dagny have become strained because of his confession of love Nagel narrates among other twice-told tales that of a love triangle:

'I had a friend who fell in love with a young lady by the name of Klara. He made great efforts to win her affection, but to no avail. Klara wouldn't have anything to do with him, though he was handsome and had an impeccable reputation. Klara had a sister, hunchbacked and terribly ugly—she was positively grotesque. One day my friend proposed to her; God only knows why he did it. Perhaps he had an ulterior motive, or it could be that he had fallen in love with her despite her ugliness. And what do you think Klara did? The female in her showed her claws. She screamed; she made dreadful scenes. "It was me he wanted all along," she cried. "But not for anything in the world would I accept his proposal." And do you think he was allowed to have the sister, with whom he had fallen in love? Ah, there's the rub. Klara wouldn't let her sister have him either. Of course he wanted Klara, but having been rejected by her, he couldn't have her hunchbacked sister, though no one else wanted her. And so my friend didn't get either girl' [p. 207].

In the course of their argument during the bazaar Nagel attends with Martha, Dagny pointedly recalls the story:

'You couldn't possibly think—I mean, you don't imagine that I'm jealous? You couldn't be more mistaken! I remember the story you told about a madman who . . . fell in love with a girl named Klara. Oh, I remember it very well. And although Klara wouldn't have anything to do with him, she couldn't stand the idea of her hunchbacked sister having him either. I don't know why you told me that; you must have had your reasons, but it's got nothing to do with me' [p. 239].

Despite his usual shrewdness Nagel is completely taken aback when Dagny lashes out at him. It is part of his paradoxical nature that his ingenuity deserts him when he needs it most; his skill in circumstantial arrangements becomes useless during vital confrontations, and hence he quickly forfeits his precarious gains. On the other hand Dagny's spontaneous outrage seems like duplicity as one follows the turn of events: Dagny actually does persuade Martha to break her marriage arrangement with Nagel and to leave her cottage so that he is unable to meet her again, though it is not possible to determine when and how Dagny manages all this. Nagel's private fictions become public realities, but again they elude him in the unfathomable spheres of the town.

It is not clear whether or not some deeper bonds between Martha and Dagny preceded Nagel's wooing. In a highly enigmatic short coda which follows Nagel's suicide the two women are walking home together from a party. Quietly and without any outward signs of emotion they talk about Nagel as the novel regains the calmly narrative tone of the very first paragraphs:

Late one night the following April, Dagny and Martha were walking through

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town; they were on their way home from a party. They were walking slowly because it was dark and there were icy patches on the road.

'I was just thinking about all the things that were said about Nagel this evening,' said Dagny. 'A lot of it was new to me.'

'I didn't hear any of it,' said Martha. 'I left the room.'

'But there was one thing they didn't know,' Dagny reflected. 'Nagel told me last summer that The Midget would come to a bad end. I don't understand how he could have known. He said it a long time before you told me what The Midget had done to you.'

'He did?'

'Yes.'

They had turned onto the parsonage road. The woods around them were dark and silent. There wasn't a sound except for their footsteps on the frozen ground . . .

After a long silence, Dagny said thoughtfully: 'This was the road he always took.'

'Who?' said Martha. 'It's slippery. Don't you want to take my arm?'

'Yes, but you had better hold on to mine.'

And silently they walked on, arms linked, holding each other tightly [pp. 339-40].[15]

And so the novel ends. Neither Minutten's presumed death, nor what he has done to Martha, nor the surprising closeness of the two women who are now apparently living together has ever been mentioned before. The town again moves in its quiet and self-contained pattern as if it had never been touched. The only event Nagel has been able to translate successfully from fiction into reality is his own death.

K.'s most significant impositions relate to his self-professed calling as land surveyor. The first tangible consequence of his ambivalently valued recognition by the castle is the appearance of the two assistants. K.'s announcement that his old assistants will be arriving soon is described as an attempt to divert the landlord's attention from any fears about K.'s questions (p. 16). The announcement's position in the novel, its purpose, and its "fictional truth" parallel Nagel's telegram about his financial status. The assistants promptly become a reality when Artur and Jeremias appear that same evening and, despite all logical contradictions, are accepted and accept themselves as the old assistants (pp. 29 ff.). As in the development of the Klara-theme in *Mysteries* the fiction is not merely realized but begins to move in sorcerer's-apprentice fashion. K. is unable to command the loyalty of his unruly assistants and finds out much later that besides conspiring against him and complaining about him to the apparently sympathetic community they have also maintained deep-seated past connections which K. fails to discover until it is too late. Frieda and Jeremias have been playmates since their

[15] One may think of Edvard Munch's lithographs of calmly enigmatic couples as one tries to visualize the scene. Its quality of release (directly after Nagel's death) further recalls the family outing which ends Kafka's "Die Verwandlung."

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childhood, possibly sweethearts, and when Frieda returns to her place in the inn and to Jeremias at least that part of the community has found its way back to the old order (p. 288). In view of such developments one recalls the naïvely pompous inadequacy of K.'s first admonition to the assistants: "Ihr dürft mit niemandem ohne meine Erlaubnis sprechen. Ich bin hier ein Fremder, und wenn ihr meine alten Gehilfen seid, dann seid auch ihr Fremde. Wir drei Fremden müssen deshalb zusammenhalten, reicht mir daraufhin eure Hände" (p. 31).

Another parallel to Nagel's behavior is suggested by the Bürgel-Fragment (pp. 409-12). In this lighthearted and sympathetic though deprecatory account of K.'s nightly encounter with the secretaries in the Herrenhof, told presumably by one of the village officials to others, K.'s problems are scaled down considerably, and he is seen as a zealously energetic, even brilliant, but on the whole eccentric pursuer of a minor affair. His theoretical understanding, his accumulation of information, his connections with various village families—all that is enormous and admirable. Nevertheless, "wenn er das Wissen anwenden soll, kommt er irgendwie in falsche Bewegung, er dreht sich wie im Kaleidoskop, er kann es nicht anwenden, es äfft ihn. Es geht schließlich doch alles wahrscheinlich darauf zurück, daß er kein Hiesiger ist" (pp. 409-10). The story of K.'s sleepy meeting with Bürgel, which is prefaced by all this commentary, here becomes not an exemplum of human, divine, or satanic irony but rather an anecdotal proof of human denseness in the sorting of facts. In this task Nagel had also failed, and the reasons are similar for both men: it is precisely the average normality of the social structure which cannot be grasped by logic or by individual emotion and intuition since it is a deep-seated convention with its own inexplicable rightness. In their attempts to become assimilated both Nagel and K. are therefore rejected as interesting but incompetent strangers.

Shortly before Nagel makes his first unsuccessful suicide attempt a long soliloquy moves him to this conclusion: "God help me, but my way of looking at things is so radically different from everybody else's. Is it my fault? Am I personally to blame? I'm a stranger, alien to this world . . ." (p. 282). Nagel's ruminations are not uniquely profound and their similarity to K.'s position is in itself certainly no proof of Hamsun's influence on Kafka's novel; a comparative interpretation does help clarify, however, that the root problems of both protagonists can be found in an inherently unsocial view of the world of phenomena.[16]

[16] For the whole problematic issue of coming to terms with the social structure and its patterns the discussions and terminology of the sociologist Erving Goffman in *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New York, 1971) are more fitting and useful here than, for instance, a paranoia analogy. Goffman distinguishes designed from undesigned situations. After his first premise, that "ordinarily there will be in the individual's *Umwelt* more that is design-uncon-

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Nagel's and K.'s emotional reactions show further similarities. Moments of despair and frustration are frequent, but they hardly dominate. Even *Mysteries*, whose hero ends by drowning himself after an unsuccessful poisoning attempt, has been called a largely gay and sunny novel.[17] The wiliness, resilience, and flexibility of Nagel and K. lift both works into profoundly comic spheres. Despite their persistent attempts to enter closed communities both men are of course freer than anyone who moves within those desired systems. Very decidedly both works maintain that their protagonists are always free to leave. In fact, their major attractions for the women whom they encounter is their knowledge of foreign places, their expertise in slipping into new guises, and their ability to get away. The turning point in Nagel's successful wooing of Martha (before Dagny dissuades her) is his projection of a pastoral dream: "They would go far away—God knows where—but they would disappear and no one would be able to find them . . . they would buy a cottage and a small plot of land somewhere in the woods . . ." (pp. 256-57). When K.'s affection for Frieda dwindles as they sit together in the dreary schoolhouse Frieda begs K. to take her away: "Ich werde dieses Leben hier nicht ertragen. Willst du mich behalten, müssen wir auswandern, irgendwohin, nach Südfrankreich, nach Spanien" (p. 163). Dagny is certainly not fascinated by Nagel's coping with the town but by the manner in which he shifts time, place, and character consistency through his tales and subterfuges. Similarly when in the last chapter of *Das Schloß* Pepi and the landlady suggest new ways of living K.'s shape-shifting flexibility is to be credited for those openings. Pepi fantasizes K. into a smuttily cozy role as protector of chambermaids in their burrow-like quarters; and the landlady begins a clothes charade with K. as instant fashion expert.

In both novels the women closest to the protagonists are insiders, whereas the significant male acquaintances— only one in each work— are outsiders in their respective communities. Both Minutten, after Nagel and Dagny the most important character in *Mysteries*, and Barnabas, the pseudomessenger expiating his sister Amalia's action in *Das Schloß*, become ambiguous links and their roles in the communities may suggest to Nagel and K. parallels to their own positions. It becomes apparent during the first confrontation between Nagel and the town structure embodied by Deputy Reinert that Minutten stands at least

nected than design-connected" (p. 311), Goffman goes on to discuss contrivance patterns, synchronic and diachronic dimensions, and forward and backward plays under the heading of "Connectedness" (pp. 310-28). Both Nagel's and K.'s evaluations differ from those of the natives in that the protagonists overstress design; as a consequence they contrive to make "corrections."

[17] Brian W. Downs, *Modern Norwegian Literature 1860-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 177.

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partially outside the social relationships which regulate the town's life. Nagel quickly takes hold of some loose ends in Minutten's world to get close to him and then to make use of other qualities which connect him with the town. Nagel voraciously seizes his opportunity when after the altercation with Reinert he tries to squeeze all conceivable facts about the community out of Minutten (pp. 24-35). This integrated outsider can give him much help: the first nonpublic information about Dagny (her relation with the suicide Karlsen) comes from him, and so does some information about Martha: Minutten is a willing object or catalyst for some of Nagel's machinations, and he remains a frequent conversational partner. Minutten is able to forestall Nagel's first suicide attempt by substituting water for prussic acid in the vial Nagel carries, but he is unable to prevent Nagel's drowning; associations with the protagonist are only partial, and in the end they fail along with whatever Nagel might have hoped to gain through Minutten. The last conversation between Dagny and Martha cited above indicates that just like Nagel, Minutten has removed himself from or has been cast out of the community after Nagel's disappearance.

Barnabas, who conveys the castle's messages to K., is treated in the village as the least affected of his stigmatized family. If not admitted in any intimate way he is nevertheless tolerated by society. As in the initial dealings between Nagel and Minutten, K.'s first contacts with Barnabas are significantly connected with dress deceptions. The coat which Reinert had promised and which Nagel orders without revealing that he is the donor signifies the beginning of an ambiguous relationship that lasts throughout the novel. Barnabas' clothes, which differ from those of the peasants and seem to mark him as an official messenger, are the first thing K. notices about the young man: "Er war fast weiß gekleidet, das Kleid war wohl nicht aus Seide, es war ein Winterkleid wie alle anderen, aber die Zartheit und Feierlichkeit eines Seidenkleides hatte es" (p. 34). The coat turns out to be a poor imitation (made by Olga) of genuine messenger's clothing; arriving with Barnabas at the latter's home K. is immediately undeceived—though this does not mean that now he sees the real truth: "Ein Mißverständnis war es also gewesen, ein gemeines, niedriges Mißverständnis, und K. hatte sich ihm ganz hingegeben. Hatte sich bezaubern lassen von des Barnabas enger, seidenglänzender Jacke, die dieser jetzt aufknöpfte und unter der ein grobes, grauschmutziges, viel geflicktes Hemd erschien über der mächtigen, kantigen Brust eines Knechtes" (pp. 43-44). Before K. becomes aware of Barnabas' powerlessness he tries to get to the castle by his coattails; once he finds out that Barnabas only goes back to his family's cottage he tries to enter the Herrenhof by way of his sister Olga. But besides Barnabas' messages, whose importance seems to dis-

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solve under closer scrutiny, K. only gains Olga's confidence and the generally known story of her family.

Ever since Max Brod's explication in Kierkegaardian terms the Amalia-story has been a battleground for castle metaphysics. Yet as Walter Sokel has succinctly demonstrated, the family's ostracism is due to their excessive guilt feelings and not to any direct punishment meted out by the authorities.[18] What one can say about the origins of their misery is even less specific. The messenger who had Sordini's torn letter flung back into his face by Amalia never appears again after he has exchanged a few words with Frieda in the inn, nor does any reprimand come from the castle. The mainspring of all the subsequent action is therefore a doubtful, unclearly motivated, misunderstood and misinterpreted event, based on some entangled core of reality in the past. K.'s reaction, "in der Erzählung Olgas eröffnete sich ihm eine so große, fast unglaubwürdige Welt, daß er es sich nicht versagen konnte, mit seinen kleinen Erlebnissen an sie zu rühren, um sich ebenso von ihrem Dasein als auch von dem eigenen deutlicher zu überzeugen" (pp. 250-51), is indeed most appropriate, except that as usual the relationship which he and most critics deduce is irrelevant. Neither Amalia who remains immovable nor the castle which does not stir should be decisive exempla for K.; what does parallel him is the senseless bustling of the rest of the family.

Olga, her parents, and later on Barnabas react frantically to an unspecifiable and probably imagined cause; K. presses claims and structures his life on the basis of the equally dubious role as a surveyor. In a useless and obscene manner the family tries to undo the event by immersing itself completely in the affair; K. tries to achieve his demands by behaving in an increasingly inappropriate manner as regards his self-professed calling—in each case the machinations lead to results exactly opposed to those desired. Furthermore, in each case the actors seem to act in accordance with ordinarily unacceptable personal desires or characteristics: Olga does penance in a permanent orgy with castle servants, Barnabas plays at being a well-dressed messenger, and the pettily tyrannical and ill-mannered father increases his bullying, whining, and pompous bustling as he pesters himself into premature senility; K. grows irritable, irresponsible, and promiscuous, and follows his inclinations for petty prying. The appeals of the Barnabas family become constantly more preposterous as they address themselves to messengers of messengers and to lecherous servants; K.'s evasive meanderings take him to barmaids, chambermaids, and even to children to whom he tells fantastic tales of his healing powers.[19] This is the true relation

[18] *Franz Kafka—Tragik und Ironie*, pp. 469-70.

[19] "Ein anderer hätte während dieser Zeit schon zehn Länder ausgemessen,

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between the Amalia-story and K., and it is a great comic touch that in the meeting of K. with Barnabas the deceptions of the two futile schemes explode against each other: a false messenger delivers a public-private letter to a false recipient.

In both novels the protagonists try to gain footholds in closed communities through similar subterfuges and also through similar mediators. The important similarities here are relational ones: both Nagel and K. attempt to gain entrance through persons who clearly belong to the community and also through outsiders.

Nagel's boldest attempt is his wooing of Dagny Kielland, the town's princess. Nagel arrives precisely the day "flags were flying all over town in honor of Miss Kielland's engagement, which had been announced that day" (p. 3). And when he inquires about her the innkeeper confides that not only the recent suicide Karlsen must have been in love with her, but that "they're all mad about her" (p. 12). She clearly is the town's most desirable and treasured love object, and this may be one of the reasons Nagel is obsessed by her. To win her might gain him the strongest possible hold on the town.[20] At the other extreme stands Minutten, the town freak whose equally ritualized position Nagel attempts to use while at the same time he courts Dagny. Finally there is Martha Gude whose secluded poverty places her outside the town's notables but whose former position (her father had been a sea captain) bequeaths the privileges of gentility.

K. moves even more impetuously than Nagel in his wooing of Frieda, who becomes attractive the instant she identifies herself as Secretary Klamm's mistress and hence as a figure of respect and a possible means of access to both castle and village. *Das Schloß* is the more complicated of the two novels; while Nagel focuses on the unattainable Dagny, K. wins Frieda only to find that his own asocial nature drives her away again, just as his physical weaknesses prevent his getting close to the castle during the first explorations and his late sleepy meeting with Bürgel. The extreme outcasts, Barnabas' family, are also a good deal more complex than Minutten. Still there are basic similarities even here. Both enjoyed respectable positions in earlier days (Minutten's father had been the town's pastor), and the causes of their declines are ambiguous. Both are now placed in clearly negative situations, and quite early in the novels the two protagonists fail in their attempts to use them to enter local society. Finally there are a number of figures whose

er pendelt noch immer hier im Dorf zwischen den Sekretären hin und her . . ." (Bürgel-Fragment, p. 410).

[20] It may be significant that her engagement and Nagel's arrival fall on June 12, following St. Barnabas, the night of the oldest midsummer fire rites. It is one further link to ancient communal customs.

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fluctuating social standings (Pepi the chambermaid-turned-barmaid) or whose unclear family role (the child Hans Brunswick) place them in borderline categories.

Despite these more complex movements of *Das Schloß* the theses of both works and their essential ramifications resemble each other significantly. The protagonist is attracted by an atavistic, self-contained, closed system which he attempts to infiltrate. He counters the society's structure with projections of his own, tries to draw persons from a number of different stations within the community into his newly invented system, and to use them to gain entry to the older order. His remarkable freedom from all social and moral constraints enables him to move faster and more flexibly than the community-bound characters, but this same freedom prevents him from reaching his goal of becoming accepted in the community. The ability which keeps him volatile and alive in the highest sense is also the liability which makes his life unbearable. This is best expressed in K.'s reflections when he stands alone at night in the Herrenhof's courtyard which he seems to own at that moment:

> . . . da schien es K., als habe man nun alle Verbindung mit ihm abgebrochen und als sei er nun freilich freier als jemals und könne hier auf dem ihm sonst verbotenen Ort warten, solange er wolle, und habe sich diese Freiheit erkämpft, wie kaum ein anderer es könnte, und niemand dürfe ihn anrühren oder vertreiben, ja kaum ansprechen; aber—diese Überzeugung war zumindest ebenso stark—als gäbe es gleichzeitig nichts Sinnlosereres, nichts Verzweifelteres als diese Freiheit, dieses Warten, diese Unverletzlichkeit [p. 129].[21]

In the struggle between the two systems the community, rightly or wrongly, remains the stronger. While the protagonist need not go down in defeat, on the other hand he cannot win.

The cause of this necessary failure lies in the paradoxical nature of the protagonist's qualities and needs. He is successful in trying to gain acceptance or to fight his way into the community so long as he is using his freedom and his trickster's qualities. But those qualities are precisely what keep him from his goal. He plans elaborate strategies which work up to the all-important points of transfer, but there the exchange of values always fails. The smooth transitions of a successful *Entwicklungsroman* are impossible. Instead there are reversals, jugglings, sleights of hand. Nagel and K. are consummate masters on one level or even on a number of levels, but they are unable to merge into the total nonreflective texture of the community. It all leads back to the supplicant's problem in "Beschreibung eines Kampfes," the inability to accept the commonplace as commonplace.

[21] See also Heinz Politzer, *Franz Kafka; Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 279.

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It may be that the ignorant man, alone,
Has any chance to mate his life with life
That is the sensual, pearly spouse, the life
That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze.[22]

University of Hawaii

[22] Wallace Stevens, "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man," in *The Collected Poems* (New York, 1954), p. 222.

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